DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 875 FL 014 251

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TITLE What Does "Wicked Good" Really Mean? Students Talk about Their ESL Problems.
PUB DATE Dec 83
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT MEXTESOL Journal; v7 n4 p42-55 Dec 1983

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; Audiotape Recordings; *College Students; *English (Second Language); Higher Education; Idioms; Interviews; *Language Attitudes; *Listening Comprehension; Regional Characteristics; School Orientation; *Second Language Learning; Semantics; Student Motivation; *Student Problems; Student Recruitment; Surveys; Television

ABSTRACT

A survey of 25 international students studying in Massachusetts colleges gathered information on 4 specific aspects of their American college experience (recruitment, orientation, adaptation, and acculturation) as well as about their experiences with English. In interviews, nine students said they had had no problems with the English language; four of these, native speakers of English or having had considerable English experience, later showed they did have some difficulty with American accents. Among the most common problems found were in aural comprehension, slang and colloquialisms, speed of others' speech, producing speech, understanding jokes, and speaking with people students felt were hostile. Students felt that in order to learn English better they needed to stay away from their fellow countrymen and converse with native English speakers. Other aids student found to be helpful were television, conversation, dictionaries, and writing. Students felt that the greater their own desire to learn was, the greater their success would be. (MSE)

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WHAT DOES "WICKED GOOD" REALLY MEAN?
Students Talk About Their ESL Problems

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> When somebody would come up and say they had a "wicked good" time, I didn't know what the hell they meant....I goes, "Well, which was it....good or bad?"

These words, uttered by a twenty-four-year-old college senior from Canada, typify a dilemma faced by all speakers of a second or third language.

How often have we said to ourselves or heard our students say, "I understand all the words but I don't know what they're saying"? What is even more interesting in this Canadian student's comment is the fact that English is his first language.

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The purpose of this paper is to present other comments made by foreign students about the English language and to discuss what we, as teachers of any second language, can learn from their remarks.

Approximately one year ago, I had the unique and totally delightful pleasure of speaking with 25 international students who were then enrolled in Bridgewater, Framingham and Worcester State Colleges. The study I was conducting had been designed to gather and analyze the perceptions of these undergraduates with regard to their stay in the particular colleges. Using an in-depth interview procedure, I asked a series of questions of each student and recorded the interviews on individual cassettes.

The four general areas of the study were: (1) recruitment, (2) orientation, (3) adaptation and (4) acculturation. In the area of adaptation the first question was:

> Did you have any problem with the English language? If yes, what? (How did you correct this problem?)

There were nine students who answered "no" to this question. After probing, five of the nine could say that they really had not had any problems, even understanding the American accent. The countries of origin of these five students were: Bahamas, Bermuda, Iran, Nigeria and Uganda. For all but the Iranian, English was the native language, and they had been exposed to American speech patterns before coming to the United States. As for the Iranian, when questioned as to why she spoke English so well and what her background in English had been before the United States, she replied:

> I had English all through my life--in school and in elementary school.... I started really early...I was really young. And we used to...learn, like...three hours Farsi, our own language and three hours, the same time, English ....Since I was a kid...I liked English better than my language.
>
> (Student #22)

The four students who initially answered "no" to this question, and then showed that they did have some difficulty, were from Greece, Iran, Trinidad and Zimbabwe. These interviewees were also either native speakers of English or students who had had a considerable amount of English study in their native country. For example, the Greek student, when asked how much English she had had in Greece replied:

> Seven years...My three first years, I had it an hour and a half, three times a week plus...an hour and a half which was audio-visual....After that...almost every day an hour and a half, two hours a lot of times. And my two last years I had it every day for two hours plus on Sunday from nine to

three with a fifteen-minute break, nothing else....Private school...that just teaches English.

(Student #10)

The problems experienced by these four students who originally said "no" were either in understanding the American accent or in making themselves understood:

Sometimes, like if they just stood up to talk to me...talk straight, I would understand. But if...they were just talking...fast and talking with slang and stuff, I didn't understand.

(Student #4)

Other people had problems understanding my English because I...had a British accent and they couldn't understand it. And I used to use slang words that...were British...

(Student #10)

In both cases, speaking slowly helped to correct the problem:

ER:* What did you do about the problem of understanding people?

EE:** I just said "slow (laughter) down."

ER: And did they usually?

EE: Yuh....

(Student #4)

* Interviewer
** Interviewee

ER: How did you get people to understand you?...

EE: I...just started speaking really slowly. ...Once I spoke slowly, it was easier for them to understand it. And I tried paraphrasing what I wanted to say, so it would get through to them....That worked fine.

(Student #10)

Among the problems encountered by the 16 interviewees who answered "yes" to this question, one of the more frequent ones was in the area of aural comprehension:

...understanding...When I first came here, everything sounded like...noise...I just couldn't understand anything, even though I had a good background in English...five years...I got into English, I...listened to English music ....I knew some people that...knew how to speak in English...When I first came here...I just couldn't understand, for first, I think, two months.

(Student #24)

Slang continued to be mentioned as a hindrance in their understanding others:

Slang was the biggest problem...different terms...different vocabulary from what you learn in high school. That's kind of...basic English that...they're learning in high school....

A lot of times I didn't really understand the exact meaning of a word. But I could make up what they were talking about from the context, you know.

(Student #12)

...First six months, I think I was trying to get myself familiar with the accent, and then I started learning words,

> and then I started learning slang, you know (laughter). Because it's very rough when you know the correct English and they say something, "I ain't gonna do this."... And then you go and look for "ain't gonna" in the dictionary, and you don't know what it is.
>
> (Student #8)

Among the commentaries on colloquialisms was the following made by the previously cited Canadian whose native language is English:

> When somebody would come up and say they had a wicked good time, I didn't know what the hell they meant....I goes, "Well, which was it, ...good or bad"?...Terms like..., "C'mon, let's go to the packy."...First time I heard that I thought they were talking about a Pakistani's house!...They said, "No, no, no, a package store."
>
> "What's that?"
>
> "That's where you buy beer." In Ontario..."Let's go t' the brewery...or the LCBO...or beer store"....Small things like "hot ticket"....I got a big kick out of the way ...they never pronounced r's...If they would really talk fast--it would be like a southerner...quick drawl...you have to listen.
>
> (Student #19)

Although some interviewees did say that they would ask people to repeat or to speak slowly when they were unable to understand, other students did not do this when they did not understand a professor in class:

> ER: What about in your classes? Do you have trouble understanding the professors?

EE: Sometimes I can't follow.

ER: Sometimes you cannot follow?

EE: Yuh--except the physics, calculus, English and P.E. Just only one course I can't follow is psychology.

ER: That one you cannot follow.

EE: Yeah.

ER: Have you talked to the professor?

EE: No.

ER: You afraid to talk (laughter) --

EE: (Laughter) Yeah.

ER: Why?

EE: I don't know...

(Student #2)

The more courageous students would speak to a professor about not understanding:

I used to ask a lot of questions... I use to--make my teachers go crazy because--ask them, you know, a thousand questions and I think that was why I learnt English. Yuh. Because I wasn't shy, because some people are very shy. I wasn't shy and I asked a lot of questions and you know, I had my little dictionary with me all the time, so...

(Student #8)

EE: ...Yuh...I had some problems. Even now, I still have problem understanding them, because when they use American jokes...I still don't understand some...of their jokes. And that may play an important role to somebody understanding what is going on in the class...

ER: You never asked if you didn't get it...?

EE: Well--there are certain things that you don't have to ask...that I feel...I would look stupid, because everybody in the class--
Maybe, you are the only foreign student there and ...sometimes when you ask certain questions--I prefer asking such questions after the class...what I do is to ask my fellow students instead of asking the master, or the lecturer...

ER: ...have you ever...gone to the professor after class, or the lecturer...and asked him...?

EE: Yuh, I think I...do that...

(Student #25)

In addition to understanding, interviewees mentioned problems in speaking English:

EE: Yuh, I don't speak now (laughter)...imagine when I came...I had three months studying English...and I had a teacher, he helped me a lot.

ER: So you had private lessons...for those three months, and then when you came here, what problems...?

EE: Sometimes, when people was talking to me. Sometimes I could understand them. But I couldn't explain what I wanted to tell them. ...Ooh, that was awful!

ER: How did you correct those problems then?

EE: I still carry my dictionary with me...all the time. So, sometimes I was looking the dictionary. It was funny, but people, I think some of them could understand. But another one...was like looking to me, and thought, "Well, we don't care about you and your problems." Sometimes we have hard problems when we find those people.

(Student #23)

More than once, interviewees stated that as a means of improving their spoken English, it was necessary to get away from colleagues from their native countries:

EE: ...The thing was that I spent a lot of time with American families...In the beginning...there were times, like, I didn't speak Persian for six or seven months--except if I called my father...

ER: So that certainly helped you...being forced, really to speak English.

EE: Right, right, being forced...

(Student #8)

Let me tell you this. I learned English because I don't talk with say my country people. I think that's for my benefit. Because if I talk with the same guy I talk same my language, you're not going to learn too well.

(Student #9)

EE: I couldn't speak that well--I wasn't familiar with the...environment, how people talk--culture shock, you know.

ER: How did you correct...speaking?

EE: Less talking to Iranians and more talking to Americans. Especially, girlfriends. That is the best thing, honest to God.

(Student #7)

Other self-proven aids to improve a student's English were television, listening and speaking with other people, dictionaries, and writing:

ER: ...then, to correct your English problem...reading a lot--

EE: Read and write.

ER: How writing?

EE: Well--like, if--free writing they call it now. Just... write....When I was in Iran, whenever I was upset I used to write for myself and express myself in writing. So I tried to write them in English so that I would learn--and if I didn't know one meaning, like--I would pick up Persian-English dictionary and--

ER: Then write, find the word in English?

EE: English, yuh--That would help a lot.

(Student #5)

When you going to talk English, don't think in your language and talk it and translate it. That's difficult....Try to...copy how people they talk.... Listening, listening too much and just copy how they're

doing. Watching the accent. You know, trying to copy the accent, how they do.

(Student #9)

ER: What else helped you?

EE: T.V...."General Hospital." Soap opera is very good for foreign students...because they don't speak that fast, you know. They're not worried about finishing a movie in two hours....Every-day life,... It's very slow...it's not John Wayne-type movies, to go fast...T.V. helped a lot--"Sesame Street." It was for children, but you know I got my own T.V. at my room and I watched..."Sesame Street" ... I still have more American friends, boys and girls, than I have Iranian friends.

(Student #7)

ER: ...in the beginning, T.V. Did you watch a lotta' T.V.?

EE: Yes, I watched a lotta' T.V.

ER: And did that help you?

EE: Yes...that helped...I think so....Right now I even do it, when I hear a word in the news or something. I just pick up my dictionary and look it up and you know, I still do it.

ER: So, really, you corrected the problem in the beginning by asking questions--

EE: Right--

ER: Using the dictionary--

EE: I think...if a foreign student isn't shy to ask and isn't shy to speak, even though it's wrong grammar ....As long as you can express yourself, you know, I think they can learn English very fast.

(Student #8)

Since I was in...private school they have...meetings and I was very much into sports, so I...got related with guys...that...play every night. So I used to... go to the gym and that's how...I got in touch with people...from Venezuela, too. I met them at the gym ....Met a lo' of people and started...trying to communicate with them....I wasn't afraid....My roommate who was from Venezuela, too...spoke very good English...and he used to tease me all the time because I just couldn't pronounce the things. That was my main problem, pronouncing...he just made...fun of me. But at the same time he would tell me how to say it right, if I say something wrong....I didn't mind that... because that encouraged me...to do better. So, he really helped me, without knowing it.

(Student #24)

The final comment I wish to share was made by a young man from Japan in reference to a step which he, as a learner of a second language, had to take:

Maybe the words means such, such...and I try to use it 'cause maybe I'm saying inter-different things... but I try to say it....Then the guy understand me, right....Now, I know, oh, the words is that's what I thought.

(Student #16)

At the time of the interviews I had had several years' experience

both in teaching French to American students and in training secondary school teachers of Frenc . It was only natural, therefore, that I would automatically equate certain of the interviewees' remarks about learning English with a foreign language methodology that I had either been using or saying should be used.

For instance, when Student #9 said, "When you going to talk English, don't think in your language and talk it and translate it," I thought of the many French composition students who had heard me yell, "Stop thinking in English!" Student #8's words that if a foreign student "isn't shy to speak," and Student #24's statement that he met a lot of people and started "trying to communicate with them," brought back memories of countless conversation classes where I had cringed at grammatical atrocities but dared not interrupt a student for fear that he/she would never utter another word in French.

It was most reassuring to me as a foreign language teacher to hear these students express some of my firm beliefs about second language learning. For example, the belief that the greater the student's desire, the better he/she will learn a language was apparent in Student #22's statement that she had liked English better than her own language since she was "a kid."

The belief that constant, intensive exposure to a language is one of the better ways to learn it was strengthened by Student #10's remarks about the schedule during her last two years of learning English in Greece - every day for two hours "plus on Sunday from nine to three with a fifteen-minute break, nothing else." The fact that both this student and Student #22, non-native speakers of English, were among the nine who experienced minimal difficulty with English when they first came to this country further strengthened my beliefs.

The "wicked good" student certainly helped to remind me that even people who are native speakers have difficulties understanding regional accents. Another native speaker of English, Student #25 from Nigeria, when he said that "even now" he sometimes has problems understanding his professors because they use American jokes,

illustrated to me the belief that an acquaintance with a country's culture facilitates comprehension of its language.

Student #23's remarks that she had difficulty speaking English with people who displayed a hostile attitude underlined my firm belief that conversation requires a warm, friendly atmosphere, and that it is part of the teacher's task to create this atmosphere in a conversation classroom. On the other hand, Student #6's remark that he would try to use a word and had to be brave to use it, reminded me of the countless pep talks I had given in conversation classes to convince students that they too had to make an effort, that they would never learn to speak French if they did not try.

Student #7's comments on soap operas and why they are useful for learning English initially caused a cynical reaction in me. However, upon further reflection and consideration, I realized that when he stated, "They don't speak that fast" and "It's very slow," that he too was verbalizing familiar foreign language techniques.

To stir me from the reverie caused by the interviewees' remarks, I turned to a book which I had used as a basic text when teaching foreign language methodology courses. The book is Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice, Second Edition, and its author is Kenneth Chastain (1976). In his chapter entitled "First-Language Learning" Chastain made a list of possible inferences from first to second-language learning. It was this list that further explained the déjà-vu feeling I had had while listening to the interviewees speak about their experiences with the English language.

I should like to conclude this paper with four inferences from Chastain's list (1976:51-52). To each excerpt I have added a remark from one of my interviewees that illustrates an actual student encounter with Chastain's view. I have chosen these particular excerpts from his list because they seem to summarize best what we as second-language teachers might reaffirm or learn from the interviewees in my study:

2. Imitation and reinforcement play an important role in first-language learning.

"Listening, listening too much...and just copy how they're doing..." (Student #9)

4. One common error is the insistence on a natural-speed rendition. The model is thus incomprehensible (and only after comprehension does learning begin) and it is impossible for the student to repeat it. All parents slow down for their children; why not teachers?

"I just said...'slow down'..." (Student #4)

6. ...the important goal in language is that of communication, even if there are some grammatical errors and the pronunciation is not perfect...

"...If a foreign student isn't shy to speak even though it's wrong grammar...they can learn English very fast." (Student #8)

7. ...the students' confidence, usually shaky as they begin language study, must be carefully preserved.

"...but another one was...looking to me and thought, 'Well, we don't care about you and your problems.' Sometimes we have hard problems when we find those people." (Student #23)